

One Foot Between

by David Lee Condrey

Father Andrew Sullivan had seen the church in every possible light—morning sun filtering through stained glass, creating colorful patterns on the stone floor, and the soft glow of candles flickering in the dim twilight of evening prayers. The stained glass windows transformed the sunlight into a kaleidoscope of reds, blues, and greens, casting intricate shapes that seemed to dance across the stone. The scent of old wood mixed with incense lingered throughout, a persistent aroma that told stories of generations past—of whispered prayers, of tears shed and joys celebrated. Subtle sounds filled the sacred space: the creak of wooden pews shifting under weight, the muffled rustle of someone kneeling in prayer, the occasional drip of melted wax from a candle echoing in the silence. The soft shuffling of feet on stone, the distant clink of a thurible swaying in a sacristy, even the faint rustle of vestments—all these sounds formed a symphony that seemed to breathe life into the sacred walls.

Each corner of the church held its own history, its own weight of memory. The fourth pew from the front, where Mrs. Henderson had sat every Sunday for thirty years, still bore the slight depression from her constant presence. The left confessional, with its worn velvet cushion, had absorbed thousands of whispered sins and quiet tears. Even the stone steps leading to the altar were subtly smoothed at their centers, shaped by generations of faithful feet approaching communion.

Father Andrew knew every mark, every imperfection in the building's ancient bones. The crack in the west wall that appeared after the harsh winter of '89, now lined with

gold paint in the Japanese tradition of kintsugi—making beauty from brokenness. The slightly misaligned ceiling beam that the original builders had never quite set right, a reminder that even sacred spaces carry their imperfections. The place where rainwater sometimes seeped in during particularly fierce storms, leaving a water stain that, in certain lights, resembled a pair of praying hands.

These physical markers of time and wear had become a kind of rosary for him—each one a bead to touch, a memory to recall, a prayer to whisper. The church's imperfections mirrored his own spiritual journey: weathered, marked by time, yet somehow made more meaningful by its scars. He often traced these familiar flaws with his fingers during his private prayers, finding in their tangible reality a comfort that sometimes eluded him in more abstract matters of faith.

Father Andrew had an unremarkable way of slipping in and out of people's lives, often mistaken for just another shadow passing through. He remembered visiting Margaret, a widow struggling with the recent loss of her husband. He had sat with her in silence, offering nothing but his presence, and in that quiet companionship, something shifted—Margaret later told him that it was the first time she felt a glimmer of peace since her husband's passing. His parish in the Midwest was nestled between miles of cornfields and suburban developments, a place where heaven and earth felt particularly close, yet particularly out of reach. It was here that Father Andrew often found himself caught between worlds: the sacred and the mundane, the ethereal and the painfully real.

Father Andrew was a man of quiet resilience. He had spent decades in service to his parish, his presence marked by a gentle humility that made him seem almost invisible at times. With thinning gray hair and eyes that carried a mix of weariness and warmth, he embodied the paradoxes of faith—steadfast yet questioning, hopeful yet aware of the shadows in his heart. His sermons were not fiery proclamations but rather soft-spoken reflections that spoke to those who needed comfort more than doctrine. Father Andrew often wrestled with doubts of his own, but it was this very struggle that made him human to his congregation. He had the unique ability to connect with others' pain, to sit with them in their suffering without needing to fix it. The people of his parish sensed his humanity, and that made all the difference.

Time moved differently within the church walls. Father Andrew measured it not by minutes or hours, but by the familiar rhythm of rituals—the morning blessing of the sanctuary, the whispered prayers before Mass, the evening lighting of candles. Each day folded into the next like pages of a well-worn breviary, marked by the repetition of ancient words and gestures that had lost none of their meaning through countless iterations.

He kept track of years by the changing faces in his congregation: babies he'd baptized growing into teenagers who slouched in the back pews, elderly parishioners whose attendance grew sporadic before ceasing altogether. The Williams family who sat in the middle section every Sunday for twelve years, until Mr. Williams' job took them to Arizona. The Rodriguez twins who served as altar boys through middle school, their synchronized movements making the ritual seem like a carefully choreographed dance.

Young couples he'd married returning with children of their own, completing a cycle he'd witnessed dozens of times.

Sometimes, in the quiet moments between services, Father Andrew would walk the church's perimeter, trailing his fingers along the cool stone walls. Each step was a kind of prayer, each touch a recognition of the countless others who had walked this same path before him. He thought of Father Michael, his predecessor, who had served this parish for thirty-five years until his hands shook too much to hold the chalice. And before him, Father Thomas, whose name was still carved into the old oak desk in the rectory.

The seasons marked their passage differently here too. Spring brought Easter lilies and the sound of children's patent leather shoes clicking on stone floors. Summer filled the church with warm light and the distant buzz of cicadas during afternoon prayers. Fall scattered maple leaves across the cemetery paths, and winter pressed its cold fingers against the stained glass, while inside, advent candles marked the waiting darkness with points of light.

He remembered being a young boy, peeking around the corner into the kitchen. His mother, her face flushed with frustration, stood by the kitchen table, her hands trembling as she clutched her rosary. His father, seated with arms crossed, spoke in a tone that was equal parts anger and exhaustion. The argument escalated—words about the worth of prayer, about the church's role in their family—until his father slammed his fist on the table, the plates rattling in response. Andrew, hiding in the hallway, felt the divide deepen, as if faith was tearing at the seams of his family rather than holding them

together. That memory, vivid and raw, marked the beginning of Andrew's complex relationship with belief.

Father Andrew's path to priesthood was as much a journey of self-discovery as it was one of faith. Born in a small town not far from where he now served, Andrew grew up in a home that was reverent yet fractured. His mother was devout, her life centered around the church, while his father was a skeptic, often dismissing religion as 'wishful thinking.' This dichotomy shaped Andrew's worldview from an early age—faith was something he both longed for and questioned, a tension that never quite eased. He found solace in the rituals of the church, in the quiet sanctuary where incense hung in the air like a comforting shroud.

The decision to join the seminary came after his father's sudden death—a heart attack that shattered the fragile balance of their home. Andrew received the phone call in the middle of the night, the harsh ring jolting him awake. His mother's voice, broken and trembling, delivered the news, and Andrew felt the world slip out from under him. He rushed to the hospital, barely remembering the drive—the flashing lights, the cold hospital hallway, the sterile smell that seemed to seep into his skin. When he arrived, it was too late. The profound silence in the room where his father lay was deafening, a silence that seemed to swallow all the words they had never said to each other. It was in the days that followed, in the emptiness of their house and the quiet moments that stretched endlessly, that Andrew found himself turning to God. He felt an aching void, a need for answers that no one could provide, and it was this void that eventually led him to the seminary—a silence that Andrew felt only God could fill.

The parish he led was an unassuming one, a small church that had stood for decades among the ever-expanding suburban sprawl. It wasn't just a building; it was the people within it—faces that Father Andrew had come to know intimately. There was Margaret, who had lost her husband and found solace in the ritual of lighting a candle each Sunday, her hands trembling slightly as she struck the match, her eyes reflecting the flickering flame as if searching for some lingering connection. There was James, a young father struggling with unemployment, who sought Father Andrew's counsel during dark times, his face etched with exhaustion, the weight of his worries evident in the slump of his shoulders. And there was little Sophie, who always carried a crayon drawing for Father Andrew, her small hands clutching the paper tightly, her eyes lighting up as she presented her artwork—a reminder that hope still flourished in even the smallest parishioners, untouched by the harshness of the world. Each of them brought their stories, their burdens, and their grace, making the church more than stone and glass—it was a mosaic of human experience, fragile and enduring.

Father Andrew often wondered if his parishioners saw him as anything more than a conduit for their prayers, an intermediary to something greater. He moved among them quietly, offering a listening ear and a comforting word, but there were times when he felt as much a stranger to God as anyone else. He remembered a particular night during Lent, when he had visited James, who had just lost his job. They had sat in the dim kitchen, the air thick with unspoken worries. Father Andrew had offered a prayer, but even as he spoke, he had felt the distance between his words and the comfort James needed, a reminder of his own uncertainties.

It was a Tuesday morning when Father Andrew received the call from the nursing home. Mrs. Callahan had requested a priest. She had made peace with her failing body, they told him, but she was uneasy about her soul. Father Andrew understood the sort of request that came when someone's body was ready for departure, but their spirit was still holding on to some unfinished task or unspoken truth.

He drove to the nursing home in his old, rust-speckled station wagon, the air conditioning long out of commission, the car as weary as the priest who drove it. The town was bathed in the flat light of late summer, a brightness that blurred edges and cast long shadows. Father Andrew often thought the town's appearance mirrored his own sense of faith: a bright glow over deeper, uncharted shadows.

Father Andrew often found himself wrestling with the questions that had haunted him since his early days at the seminary. Was he truly making a difference? Was his faith as strong as it needed to be, or was he simply going through the motions? There were times, late at night, when he knelt in the empty church, the flickering candles casting shadows that seemed to echo his own uncertainties. He would close his eyes and try to feel God's presence, but more often than not, there was only silence—an emptiness that both frightened and comforted him. He wondered if faith was meant to be this way, a constant tension between belief and doubt, a struggle without a clear resolution. And yet, it was in that struggle that he sometimes caught a glimpse of something real—an honest, raw connection to the divine that had nothing to do with certainty and everything to do with persistence.

Mrs. Callahan was waiting for him, sitting propped up in her bed. Her skin was papery, almost translucent, the delicate veins visible beneath. Her eyes were clouded, yet they still held an urgency, a spark that refused to be extinguished. Her hands, thin and trembling, were hands that had lived—a lifetime of work and tenderness etched into them. Fingers lined with deep veins, knuckles swollen from years of labor, palms marked with lines that seemed to map out every hardship, every joy, every sacrifice she had made. Her eyes, though dimmed with age, carried the weight of decades of secrets, of quiet moments of grief and unspoken words. They were eyes that had seen too much, yet still sought something beyond. Her fingers twitched as if she were trying to grab onto something tangible, some last bit of life. She looked at him, and Father Andrew felt the weight of all the times he'd come to witness a soul caught between letting go and holding on.

"I'm glad you came," she rasped, her voice a fragile thread. "I need to confess, Father. I've been carrying this for too long."

Father Andrew sat by her side, the scent of antiseptic mingling with something sour and sad. He nodded, gesturing for her to continue. He had heard countless confessions in his years as a priest, but there was something about Mrs. Callahan's urgency that struck him. It wasn't the usual weary recounting of sins. It was something deeper.

Mrs. Callahan took a deep, shaky breath, her eyes unfocused as she stared at the wall behind Father Andrew. "I haven't told anyone this, not even my husband," she began, her voice barely audible. "It was 1957. I was young, foolish, and in love with someone I shouldn't have been." Her voice cracked, and she closed her eyes, as if trying to find

the strength to continue. "His name was Thomas. He wasn't Catholic, and my family... well, they would have disowned me if they knew."

Mrs. Callahan's voice grew fainter as she spoke, her gaze distant, lost in the past. "He was kind, Father. Kinder than anyone I'd ever known. We used to meet at the park—always the park, because it was the only place we could be ourselves. He had this laugh, this way of looking at me like I was the only person in the world." Her lips trembled into a smile, a brief flicker of warmth breaking through the sadness. "There was this one day... I remember it so clearly. The sun was setting, and he twirled me around, right there in the middle of the park, like we were in some kind of movie. Just for a moment, everything felt perfect." She paused, her eyes misting. "I've held onto that memory, all these years. It was the only thing that kept me going sometimes."

Father Andrew listened, his gaze never leaving her face, feeling the weight of her words settle in the room.

"I found out I was pregnant," Mrs. Callahan whispered, her voice breaking. "Back then, there was no choice. My parents sent me away, told everyone I was visiting an aunt. I gave birth to a baby boy, and they took him from me before I could even hold him." Her eyes filled with tears, her frail body trembling. "I never saw him again, Father. Not once. And I never told anyone—not even my dear Patrick."

The room seemed to shrink around them, the hum of the machinery fading into the background. Father Andrew felt a lump form in his throat as he imagined the pain she had carried all these years, the silent burden that had shaped her life. He reached out, gently placing his hand over hers.

"I was too afraid," she continued, her voice cracking. "Afraid of what people would think, afraid of losing everything. But I lost him anyway, Father. I lost my boy, and I've carried that regret my whole life."

Father Andrew squeezed her hand, the words of absolution forming in his mind, though they felt inadequate in the face of such a confession. "God's mercy knows no bounds, Mrs. Callahan," he said softly. "You did what you thought was best. You were scared, and you were alone. God understands your pain, and He forgives you."

Mrs. Callahan nodded, tears slipping down her cheeks. "Thank you, Father," she whispered. "I just... I needed someone to know. I needed someone to hear it before I go."

Father Andrew bowed his head, offering a silent prayer for her, for the life she had lost, and for the peace she so desperately sought. In that moment, he felt the weight of her story settle into his own soul, a reminder of the quiet suffering carried by so many.

When Mrs. Callahan finished, her voice a whisper lost in the hum of the nursing home's machinery, Father Andrew felt the weight of what she had told him settle in his chest. It was not the kind of confession that could be absolved with a simple prayer. It was a story of betrayal, of regret, of a choice that had altered the course of her life—and perhaps the lives of others. Father Andrew could see the burden of it had shaped her, turned her into the person she was now, frail and fearful.

He offered her the words of absolution, his voice steady even as his heart quivered with uncertainty. Mrs. Callahan closed her eyes, a tear escaping down her cheek, her lips

moving in silent prayer. Father Andrew watched her, feeling like an intruder in a sacred moment, one foot in her world, one in his own. He wanted to believe that his presence, his words, had brought her some measure of peace. But he also knew that grace was not always visible, not always a feeling that could be wrapped up and taken away.

There was something familiar about Mrs. Callahan's confession, not in its specific details, but in its weight, its urgency. Father Andrew had heard countless last confessions over the years, each unique yet somehow part of the same eternal story—the human need to be known, to be understood, to be forgiven before the final crossing. He thought of Mr. Peterson, who had confessed to years of alcoholism that had torn his family apart. Of Mrs. Chen, who admitted she had never truly loved her husband. Of Dr. Marshall, whose professional mistakes had cost a patient's life. Each confession a thread in the tapestry of human frailty and divine mercy, each one adding to Father Andrew's understanding of grace.

Father Andrew sat in silence for a moment, his own past echoing in Mrs. Callahan's words. He thought of his father—another life marked by absence, another story of faith and doubt intertwined. He remembered the last conversation they'd had, just days before the heart attack. His father had asked him why he was considering the seminary, his voice carrying that familiar mix of skepticism and concern.

"I need to understand," Andrew had told him. "I need to know if there's something more."

His father had looked at him for a long moment, then said quietly, "Sometimes understanding isn't what we need, son. Sometimes we just need to accept that we don't know."

Now, sitting beside Mrs. Callahan's bed, those words returned to him. Here was a woman who had lived with uncertainty for decades—the uncertainty of her son's fate, of God's forgiveness, of her own worth. Her suffering mirrored his own spiritual struggles in a way that made his chest ache. Like her son, lost to time and circumstance, his own faith often felt just out of reach, existing in a space between presence and absence.

"Mrs. Callahan," he said gently, "may I tell you something?" She turned her clouded eyes to him, waiting. "Sometimes I think faith isn't about what we know or don't know. It's about continuing to love despite the uncertainty. Your love for your son—it never wavered, even when you couldn't see him. Maybe that's what God's love is like too. Present, even when we can't feel it. Real, even when we doubt."

Mrs. Callahan's fingers tightened around his hand. "But how do you know, Father? How can you be sure?"

"I don't," he admitted. "But I've learned that doubting doesn't mean we've failed. Sometimes it means we're loving deeply enough to question, to wrestle with the hard truths. Your love for your son—that's a kind of faith too. A faith that survived despite everything."

A tear slid down Mrs. Callahan's cheek, but her face had softened somehow. In sharing his own uncertainty, Father Andrew felt he had given her something more valuable than

easy answers—he had given her permission to exist in that space between knowing and hoping, that space where real faith often lives.

The nursing home room itself seemed to hold echoes of countless similar confessions—last words, final prayers, memories shared in whispered tones. How many priests had sat in this same chair before him? How many stories had these institutional walls absorbed? The room's attempted cheerfulness—its generic watercolor prints and artificial plants—seemed to emphasize rather than mask the profound moments that occurred within its confines.

Father Andrew walked out of the nursing home, the automatic doors closing behind him with a mechanical sigh. The afternoon sun was blinding, and for a moment, he stood there, disoriented, feeling the sharp contrast between the sterile dimness inside and the world outside, vibrant and indifferent. He took a deep breath, the scent of freshly cut grass mingling with the faint tang of exhaust from the parking lot.

He made his way slowly to his car, his shoes crunching on the gravel, each step feeling heavier than the last. As he reached for the car door, he paused, his gaze drifting to the horizon where the fields stretched endlessly, shimmering in the summer heat. He felt an emptiness in his chest—a hollow space that had grown familiar over the years.

Had he truly helped Mrs. Callahan? He replayed her words in his mind, her trembling voice, the years of pain and regret that had poured out of her like a flood. He had offered her absolution, but had he given her peace? Or were his words just another ritual, a gesture that barely scratched the surface of her suffering?

Father Andrew leaned against the car, closing his eyes. The sun warmed his face, and he tried to feel God's presence in that warmth, tried to believe that grace was something real, something tangible. But all he felt was the weight of his own doubt, the same doubt that had followed him since his early days at the seminary. Was grace something he could offer, or was it something that could only be found in the silence between words, in the spaces where he couldn't reach?

He opened his eyes, looking up at the sky, a vast expanse of blue that seemed both comforting and indifferent. Perhaps his role wasn't to provide answers, but to simply be there—to listen, to witness, to hold the stories of those who had no one else to tell. Perhaps grace was not about fixing what was broken, but about standing beside the brokenness, unflinching, and refusing to turn away.

Father Andrew sighed, a deep, weary sound, and finally opened the car door. As he slid into the driver's seat, he whispered a prayer—not for Mrs. Callahan, but for himself. A prayer for the strength to keep going, even when the answers seemed far out of reach.

On the drive back, Father Andrew stopped at the church, intending to prepare for the evening mass. But instead of going inside, he found himself walking to the edge of the small cemetery behind the chapel. The gravestones stood in silent testament to the lives that had passed through his parish, each one a reminder of the stories he had heard, the confessions he had carried.

The air was still, the silence broken only by the distant rustling of leaves in the breeze. Father Andrew felt the sacred ground beneath his feet, the weight of all the stories buried there. He thought of the families who had gathered here, of the laughter and

tears, the hope and the sorrow. Each grave told a story, and in that moment, Father Andrew felt both humbled and burdened by the memories he carried.

He stood there, his eyes scanning the rows of markers, and he thought of Mrs. Callahan. He thought of her story, of her burden, and of the strange, awkward grace that sometimes found its way into the cracks of ordinary lives. Father Andrew realized that maybe his role was not to mend those cracks but simply to witness them, to stand in the gap between this world and whatever lay beyond, a witness to the messy, unfinished lives of his flock.

Father Andrew stood by the edge of the cemetery, lost in thought, when he heard the sound of small footsteps approaching. He turned to see a young boy, no older than ten, standing a few feet away, holding a bouquet of wildflowers. The boy looked up at Father Andrew with wide, curious eyes.

"Hello, Father," the boy said shyly. "These are for my grandma. She passed away last year."

Father Andrew remembered presiding over her funeral, the boy's grandmother having been one of the parishioners who always brought flowers for the altar, her faith unwavering even in her final days. She had a quiet, steady presence in the church, her devotion evident in the small but meaningful gestures—like the way she would arrange the flowers just so, making sure they were perfect for Sunday mass. He remembered her kind smile and how she always made time to speak with him after the service, asking how he was, genuinely caring. This memory made the boy's gesture even more poignant, as if her spirit was still present, carried forward by her grandson.

Father Andrew nodded, a gentle smile touching his lips. "That's very kind of you, bringing her flowers. She must have been very special."

The boy nodded vigorously. "She used to tell me stories about angels. She said they're always watching over us." He looked at the flowers, then back at Father Andrew. "Do you think that's true, Father? Are angels real?"

Father Andrew knelt down to the boy's level, his gaze softening. "I think there are many things we don't fully understand," he said. "But I do believe there are moments of grace—times when we feel something bigger than ourselves, something that gives us hope. Maybe that's what your grandma meant when she spoke of angels."

The boy seemed to consider this, a thoughtful expression crossing his face. "I hope she's happy, wherever she is," he said quietly.

Father Andrew reached out, gently patting the boy's shoulder. "I believe she is. And I think she's very proud of you for remembering her like this."

The boy smiled, a small, tentative smile, and Father Andrew felt a warmth spread through his chest—a flicker of hope amidst his lingering doubts. As the boy turned and ran off toward his parents, who were waiting by the church gate, Father Andrew stood up, watching him go.

He felt the weight of his uncertainties lift, if only for a moment. Perhaps grace was found in these small interactions, in the innocence of a child's questions, in the simple act of offering comfort. Perhaps it wasn't about having all the answers but about being present, about standing in the spaces where hope and doubt coexisted.

Behind the church, the seasons had carved their own testament into the landscape. The old oak tree, its branches reaching toward heaven like suppliant arms, had witnessed countless graveside services. Its roots had grown around and between the oldest graves, as if gathering the dead into a permanent embrace. Father Andrew sometimes thought of it as nature's own priest, offering silent benediction over those who rested in its shade.

The gravestones themselves told stories beyond their inscribed dates and names. Some leaned slightly, pressed by decades of winter frost and summer heat. Others stood straight and new, their edges still sharp, their losses still fresh. Together they formed a congregation of stone, each marker a prayer frozen in time, each name a story that the earth now held in trust.

In the fading light, Father Andrew noticed how the shadows of the crosses fell across the ground, creating patterns that shifted with the sun's movement—a daily ritual of light and dark, presence and absence, much like faith itself. The physical reality of this sacred ground, with its tangible reminders of life's impermanence, somehow made the intangible aspects of his calling feel more real, more grounded.

He thought again of Mrs. Callahan, of how her story would soon join the others here. Yet something of her would remain in the world—in the memory of that summer evening with Thomas, in the life of a son who carried her features without knowing it, in the weight of a secret finally shared. Perhaps that was what faith really meant: the belief that nothing truly ends, that every story continues in ways we cannot see but must trust exist.

The bell tolled again, its bronze voice carrying across the cemetery, and Father Andrew watched as a pair of sparrows took flight from the church roof. In their movement—their brief suspension between earth and sky—he saw another metaphor for his own position: always between, always reaching, always trusting in the unseen air that held them aloft.

Father Andrew took a deep breath, the scent of wildflowers and freshly turned earth mingling in the air. He looked up at the sky once more, the vast expanse that held both mystery and promise, and felt a sense of quiet resolve. Life and death, hope and doubt—they were all part of the same journey. And as long as he could walk beside others on that path, perhaps that was enough.

As he stood in the cemetery, Father Andrew realized that his priesthood had become a kind of living archive—not just of confessions and prayers, but of all the small moments of grace he'd witnessed over the years. The young mother who lit a candle every day during her son's deployment. The elderly man who polished the brass crosses each Saturday morning, working through his grief one smooth stroke at a time. The teenager who slipped into the back pew during lunch period, seeking refuge from school bullies.

These memories weren't burdens to be carried but gifts to be treasured, each one a reminder that faith worked not in grand gestures but in accumulated moments of quiet persistence. Like water wearing away stone, grace shaped lives not through sudden transformation but through patient presence, through the willing return to ancient rituals and the steady rhythm of prayers that had sustained generations before him.

The light was fading now, and soon he would need to prepare for evening Mass. Another ritual, another opportunity to stand in that space between heaven and earth, between doubt and certainty, between the stories of those who had gone before and those yet to come. In the distance, he could hear the soft murmur of early arrivals gathering at the church steps, and he smiled, knowing that tonight's service would add its own small chapter to the ongoing story of faith that had been written in this place for so many years.

Father Andrew stood in the cemetery, his eyes tracing the gravestones that bore witness to the lives of those who had come before. In that moment, a soft breeze rustled through the leaves, creating a gentle whisper that seemed to carry a message from beyond. He closed his eyes, listening, and then heard the distant tolling of the church bell. The sound resonated through the stillness, each chime echoing with a sense of timelessness, as if heaven itself had acknowledged this small moment of grace.

A shaft of light broke through the canopy of trees above, casting a warm glow over the gravestones. The sunlight illuminated the name of Mrs. Callahan, and Father Andrew felt a deep sense of connection—a reminder that grace was not always grand or miraculous but often quiet, subtle, and deeply personal. The bell's toll, the sunlight, the boy's flowers—all of these were tangible symbols of a faith that persisted, even when doubts clouded his heart. In that moment, he knew that his role was not to solve the mysteries of faith but to witness them, to walk alongside those who searched for meaning, just as he did.